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ABSTRACT

Noting that transfer and motivation are mutually supportive in creating an optimal learning environment, this Digest discusses transfer (the application of prior knowledge to new learning situations) and motivation (the impetus to create and sustain intentions and goal-seeking acts) in relation to language learning. It discusses the relationship between transfer and motivation, the nature of transfer, and the nature of motivation. The Digest concludes with instructional strategies to enhance student motivation and learning transfer in language learning. (Contains 20 references.) (RS)

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ERIC Digest

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Motivation and Transfer in Language Learning

by Karen Yeok-Hwa Ngeow

Transfer and motivation play important roles in learning. Transfer, the application of prior knowledge to new learning situations (McKeough, 1995), is often seen as a learning goal, and thus the extent to which transfer occurs is a measure of learning success (Pea, 1987; Perkins, 1991). Motivation, defined as the impetus to create and sustain intentions and goal-seeking acts (Ames & Ames, 1989), is important because it determines the extent of the learner's active involvement and attitude toward learning.

The relationship between transfer and motivation

Research suggests that transfer and motivation are mutually supportive in creating an optimal learning environment. If the learner perceives what he is learning to be relevant and transferable to other situations, he will find learning meaningful, and his motivation to acquire the skill or knowledge will increase. Similarly, for transfer to take place, the learner must be motivated to do two things. First, he must be able to recognize opportunities for transfer (Prawat, 1989); second, he needs to possess the motivation to take advantage of these opportunities (Pea, 1988).

The challenge of teaching is thus to simultaneously enhance transfer and motivation so that they both support learning. To do this, teachers need to first understand the nature of transfer and the nature of motivation.

The nature of transfer

Teachers often ask themselves "What is in the learning situation that needs to be transferred?" The answer may be one or more of the following: content or conceptual knowledge, strategic or procedural knowledge, and appropriate dispositions for learning (Thorndike, 1932; Perkins et al., 1993).

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CS 216 774

Proponents for the teaching of *content knowledge* over strategic knowledge argue that learners who have mastered the content knowledge of a particular domain are fully capable of displaying sophisticated use of effective strategies in new situations, including those strategies never explicitly taught (Chi, 1988). They claim that without requisite domain-specific knowledge, general strategies have a weak effect on enhancing performance in most tasks. At the same time, a common argument for emphasizing the teaching of *strategic knowledge* is that if one can identify and teach the general skills (e.g., metacognitive and problem-solving skills) that are applicable to a broad range of tasks, it is easier then to facilitate transfer of learning (Pressley et al., 1987). Although proponents from the two camps disagree on the question of what exactly is transferred, they concur that positive dispositions toward learning are vital to learner success. These dispositions include traits like high motivation, risk-taking attitudes, mindfulness or attentiveness, and a sense of responsibility for learning (Salomon & Perkins, 1988; Pea, 1988).

The nature of motivation

Gardner and Lambert (1972) introduced the notions of instrumental and integrative motivation. In the context of language learning, instrumental motivation refers to the learner's desire to learn a language for utilitarian purposes (such as employment or travel), whereas integrative motivation refers to the desire to learn a language to integrate successfully into the target language community. In later research studies, Crookes and Schmidt (1991), and Gardner and Tremblay (1994) explored four other motivational orientations: (a) reason for learning, (b) desire to attain the learning goal, (c) positive attitude toward the learning situation, and (d) effortful behavior.

Many theorists and researchers have found that it is important to recognize the construct of motivation not as a single entity but as a multi-factorial one. Oxford and Shearin (1994) analyzed a total of 12 motivational theories or models, including those from socio-psychology, cognitive development, and socio-cultural psychology, and identified six factors that impact motivation in language learning:

- attitudes (i.e., sentiments toward the learning community and the target language)

- beliefs about self (i.e., expectancies about one's attitudes to succeed, self-efficacy, and anxiety)
- goals (perceived clarity and relevance of learning goals as reasons for learning)
- involvement (i.e., extent to which the learner actively and consciously participates in the language learning process)
- environmental support (i.e., extent of teacher and peer support, and the integration of cultural and outside-of-class support into learning experience)
- personal attributes (i.e., aptitude, age, sex, and previous language learning experience).

Instructional strategies to enhance student motivation and learning transfer

Research studies have shown that language acquisition is the result of an interplay between cognitive mechanism and environmental conditions (Spolsky, 1985; Sivert & Egbert, 1995). Understanding and creating optimal language learning environments thus becomes a primary concern of the language teacher. Teachers can observe circumstances under which learners acquire language and can make adjustments toward creating optimal learning conditions. In designing learning activities, the language teacher should remember that because language learning focuses on both the accuracy and appropriateness of application in various contexts of use, learners must be given opportunities to participate as language users in multiple contexts. These opportunities will result in learners' heightened motivation and awareness of the intricacies of language use.

Some teaching strategies that can be used to foster motivation and provide better transfer opportunities of language skills include the following:

- *Encourage learners to take ownership in learning*
  Have learners take ownership of the learning assignment by letting them identify and decide for themselves relevant learning goals. This will motivate them to apply what they have learned to attain these learning goals.
- *Promote intentional cognition or mindfulness to learning in various contexts*
  Learners must be able to practice language in multiple contexts in order to bridge domains and foster active abstraction of concepts learned (Bransford, et al. 1990). This will help learners recognize the relevance and transferability of different learning skills or knowledge.
- *Increase authenticity of learning tasks and goals*
  Learners should recognize a real need to accomplish learning goals that are relevant and holistic (rather than task-specific). This prepares them for the complexities of real-world tasks that require them to use language skills and knowledge that have to be continually transferred.

Learner anxiety (Horwitz, 1986) and other negative feelings can be stumbling blocks to learners becoming cognizant of learning and transfer opportunities. Thus, providing our learners with the motivation to learn is one of the best steps we can take to facilitate learning success. This is best conveyed by Bruner (1960, p.31):

> "The best way to create interest in a subject is to render it worth knowing, which means to make the knowledge gained usable in one's thinking beyond the situation in which learning has occurred."

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